

Derek Wallbank, *MinnPost*

WASHINGTON - Jim Oberstar strode into the Rayburn committee room last week for one of his final sit-down interviews as a member of Congress well over an hour late. He apologized, he'd been held up at the doctor's office, but said he wanted to let me know the good news before we started.

The doctor said his blood pressure was normal.

What's more, his cholesterol was great, and his respiratory system was right in line for a man far younger than his 76 years. "You have unparalleled health," the doctor told him. "You're above 99 percent of the ones we see."

No, Jim Oberstar was not intending to ride into the sunset this year. His health, as he said, was fine. His mind remains encyclopedically sharp, and if all things had gone to plan, he'd have been back next year, chairing the Transportation Committee and shepherding a multi-year transportation bill that was to be his crowning achievement.

But life doesn't always go as planned. Elections have consequences, and for Oberstar the consequences of a shock loss to Chip Cravaack was this moment. Tuesday night, he said his final goodbye.

"I can look back on my service and say that I have given it my best," Oberstar told the House as he spoke for the final time in that body. "I have served the people with the best of my abilities and to the gifts that the good Lord has given me and that my parents stimulated in me."

Moving on

In less than a month's time, Oberstar will leave the House position he's held since 1975, though he has made it clear he won't go away.

Up next may be a position with the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Political Affairs, where he's in consideration for a position teaching on transportation policy. He's ruled out a job with a lobbying firm, but beyond that, who knows?

Dan Lipinski of Illinois wants to name the federal Department of Transportation building in Washington after Oberstar, a somewhat ironic honor given that Oberstar has made a habit of voting against named memorials like that.

"He always told me he never wanted to hear anyone say they'd gotten stuck on the Jim Oberstar bridge," spokesman John Schadl said.

Oberstar concedes that he won't be able to vote against that bill next session. "If Dan persists, that's a mark of great respect and appreciation, it's very nice," he said with a smile.

One thing is certain: He won't get into a rematch with Rep.-elect Chip Cravaack. Nor, he said, did he plan to wade into the primary.

As for the rumor Oberstar could become the next secretary of Transportation, if current occupant Ray LaHood steps down?

"I hope he stays," Oberstar said of LaHood, whom he served with when LaHood was a Republican House representative from Illinois. "The president may need him more than ever with the Republican turnaround as a go-between - although I frankly think he has less in common with this new cast of characters coming in than with the current Congress.

"But if the opportunity presents itself, I'd give it serious consideration."

Closing statement of 'Mr. Transportation'

Oberstar was standing on the House floor on Aug. 1, 2007, when his Blackberry buzzed. On it was a report that the Interstate 35W bridge had collapsed in Minneapolis, falling 64 feet into the Mississippi River below, killing 13.

Oberstar shepherded the emergency funding bill that built a new bridge to replace the fallen span, which opened a little more than a year after the first one collapsed.

Two years later, as the stimulus bill was being drafted, Oberstar demanded that significant sums be included to replace aging and crumbling bridges. Billions of dollars were spent on infrastructure repair, and lives were saved, Rep. Betty McCollum said, "because Chairman Oberstar recognized that Minnesota's tragedy was America's crisis."

There would have been billions more spent in a multi-year surface transportation bill Oberstar had pushed, but the clock ran out on that bill. He calls it a "great opportunity missed," but added he's confident that the new Republican-led House and Democratic Senate will find a way to pass it in the 112th Congress.

Talking to Jim Oberstar is a bit like opening a history book, a simple question often results in a 15-minute stemwinder on anything that has ever had to do with whatever was asked.

Tuesday night, however, he stayed largely silent; sitting between Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken, who had come across the rotunda to the House chamber where they together listened to the tributes flow in.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, the second-ranking Democrat, called Oberstar a "giant within this body," adding that no chairman he's known has worked harder or known his subject matter better than Oberstar.

"This election saw the defeat of many, many qualified people; not on their merits, but on the angst of the American people," Hoyer said. "But unfortunately, some babies got thrown out with the bathwater."

"Jim Oberstar will do very well," said Washington D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton. "I wish I could say the same for those of us he leaves behind."

Of course the biggest spotlight after Oberstar leaves will fall on a fresh-faced newcomer - Oberstar's replacement, Chip Cravaack.

The two have still not spoken since the election. Oberstar never called to concede, and accounts differ as to who has reached out since then and who hasn't.

But Oberstar has some advice for Cravaack.

"He'll make his own decisions, he'll cast his own votes," Oberstar said. "I would only say be consistent with what you pledged to do."

As he concluded his remarks on the House floor a week later, Oberstar reflected on the advice Adlai Stevenson once gave to college graduates: As you leave this place, reflect on why you came.

"Why I came is to serve the people, to the needs of their respective families, and to leave this district, to leave this House, to leave this nation a better place than I found it," he concluded. "I hope I achieved that goal."

"Thank you," McCollum responded. "And yes you have."